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SUBJECT: VIETNAM'S CHRISTIANS REPORT MERRY CHRISTMAS, OTHER POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS

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Summary

¶1. (SBU) We are encouraged by initial enthusiastic reports from northern Protestants and Catholics that Christmas 2006 was celebrated with incident. There have been no reports of official harassment of registered or unregistered Protestants anywhere in the north, and most house churches were allowed to gather for Christmas worship. The Catholics note that Christmas has now become a part of Vietnamese cultural life in the north. Both groups are focusing on property issues in the new year, and the Catholics hope to establish a pilot HIV/AIDS hospice in Hanoi to deepen its role in civil society. We will watch closely to see whether the GVN continues to allow, and even to facilitate, religious activities through Lent and Easter. End Summary.

The Protestants are happy...

¶2. (SBU) Pastor Au Quang Vinh, General Secretary of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN), enthusiastically told Poloff that Vietnam's northern Protestants are "ecstatic" because the Christmas season of 2006 marked the first time that local officials at the commune, district and provincial levels across the north actively helped facilitate Protestant Christmas celebrations. Many deacons from registered and unregistered house churches have visited ECVN headquarters since the holidays, but none has reported any official harassment, a significant change in conditions in the region, especially in the Northwest Highlands. Some deacons from unregistered congregations even report that, beyond allowing their congregations to gather for worship, local officials also promised to help the congregations register quickly with the CRA. In general, local officials seem to have been impressed by the peaceful nature of the ECVN congregations' celebrations and no longer view them as a threat, Vinh said.

¶3. (SBU) Vinh also reported that the ECVN added 64 additional congregations (6,000 believers) in the last few months of 2006, bringing the total number of congregations to 1091. These latest congregations have all submitted their applications to register under the new framework on religion. Vinh did not have any further updates on completed registrations of other churches and congregations in the north, but stated that it is possible that some remote congregations in the northwest have already received their registration certificates. The ECVN should have a better idea of further registrations as more deacons travel to Hanoi in the coming months, Vinh said. Asked if internet reports of harassment of ECVN Protestants in Lao Cai and Ha Giang provinces are true, Vinh stated that he had spoken personally with a number of deacons from both

provinces in the preceding weeks and none had reported problems with local officials.

¶14. (SBU) The Hanoi Provincial People's Committee (PPC) indicated just before Christmas 2006 that it would "study the problem of the ECVN church property in Hanoi" - the first official acknowledgement of ECVN's application to receive a land use certificate for their central church and training facility, Vinh continued. The ECVN will follow up on this opening by working with the PPC to ensure the organization's application package is complete according to the city bureaucracy. Finally, Vinh noted that since the President's November 19 participation in an ECVN-Catholic ecumenical service in Hanoi, Vietnamese Catholic and Protestant relations are better than they have ever been. On Christmas Day, Hanoi Archbishop Ngo Quang Kiet and his senior staff paid a surprise (and unprecedeted) visit to Vinh's church. Catholic parishioners and Protestants also exchanged holiday greetings and observed each others celebrations, Vinh said.

...and the Catholics are merry

¶15. (SBU) Father Dang Duc Ngan, Vicar General of the Hanoi Archdiocese, told Poloff in a separate meeting that the holiday atmosphere surrounding Christmas 2006 was the "best it has ever been" for northern Catholics. In the past, northern Catholics felt less open to celebrate Christmas compared with Catholics in Ho Chi Minh City; however, Christmas has now become "a part of the cultural life of the Vietnamese people" and not just for Catholics. Though the GVN may not have made a conscious decision to allow this development, Ngan noted that this last holiday season local authorities in Hanoi invited the Archdiocese to celebrate Christmas in "a grander, merrier atmosphere." The police and security officer presence was much less visible compared with previous years, despite the large crowds near the Hanoi Cathedral. The one security incident marring the Christmas holiday was the fault of a "mentally ill citizen" who attempted to set fire to the traditional nativity scene in front of the Cathedral on December 21. Police arrested the individual and then set a 24-hour guard to protect the creche, Ngan

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added.

¶16. (SBU) Catholics in other northern provinces, including several previously problematic provinces, were also pleased by GVN support of their Christmas celebrations, Ngan said. For example, Ha Giang Province, which had until recently refused to acknowledge the existence of Catholics within its borders, allowed two priests to travel to Ha Giang Town to celebrate mass with the province's Catholics. To date, the Archdiocese has not received any reports of problems from any of its northern parishes over Christmas, Ngan said.

¶17. (SBU) Ngan concluded by stating that, for the coming year, the Hanoi Archdiocese will focus on resolving two main problems: 1) the return of the former Papal Nuncio property adjoining the Hanoi Cathedral and 2) the establishment of Church charitable institutions in the north. The GVN has told the Church that the Nuncio property will be returned only after the establishment of diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the Vatican; however, the Archdiocese needs the property now to support the Vietnam Episcopacy Council, Ngan explained. The Archbishop also hopes to establish a pilot HIV/AIDS hospice run by one of the Hanoi parishes in order to serve as a model for future Church charitable programs.

Comment

¶18. (SBU) Some credible reports of problems from more remote regions in the northwest may surface in the coming weeks, as in previous years, but we are encouraged by the initial enthusiastic reports from both the Protestants and the Catholics. We will watch closely to see whether the GVN continues to facilitate this new spirit through Lent and Easter.

MARINE